DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 300 850 CS 506 462

AUTHOR Barefield, Paul A.
TITLE The Republican Keynote Speech: 1988.
PUB DATE Nov 88
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (74th, New Orleans, LA, November 3-6, 1988).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Mass Media Role; Persuasive Discourse; *Politics; *Presidential Campaigns (United States); *Public Speaking
IDENTIFIERS *Keynote Speakers; Political Parties; *Political Party Conventions; Political Rhetoric; Republican Party; Rhetorical Effectiveness; Rhetorical Strategies

ABSTRACT

From their inception in 1856, the ultimate purpose of national political conventions and also the speechmaking at the conventions, have undergone significant changes. The role of the keynoter is gradually becoming more clearly defined by the dictates of tradition and precedent. Whereas the earliest keynoters were relatively free to discuss anything from platform issues to pansies, the modern keynoter must deliver a keynote speech that at least approximates that anticipated by the immediate and greater audience. The problem is that the role of the contemporary keynoter is confused--or at least obfuscated. At the 1988 Republican Convention at New Orleans several speakers orated in the keynoter format. The noisy setting, the disruptions, the inattentive delegates, and the intrusive media all contributed to the relative ineffectiveness of Govenor Thomas H. Kean's keynote speech. The weakness of the speech was not in the speech, but in the milieu. Still, there were several notable strengths. Gov. Kean used the party heroes and "characters," attacked the opposition, utilized an audience refrain, and made effective use of transitions and other partitioning devices. (Twenty-four footnotes are included.) (MS)

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THE REPUBLICAN KEYNOTE SPEECH: 1988

PAUL A. BAREFIELD
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHWESTERN LOUISIANA

Paper delivered at the Speech Communication Association of America, New Orleans, Louisiana, November 5, 1988.

I'm glad to have the opportunity to be here this evening. It's probably the first time that I've been together with four or five people who actually watched the national political conventions.

The change in the nature and purpose of national political conventions is obvious. From its inception in 1856, the ultimate purpose of these gatherings as well as the speechmaking have undergone significant changes.

My comments today fall into four categories: First, the historical nature of the Republican keynote genre; second, some important changes that have occurred to change the nature of that genre; third, some important elements in the specific New Orleans setting for the speech, and, fourth, some observations regarding Governor Kean's 1988 address.

HISTORICAL NATURE OF THE REPUBLICAN KEYNOTE GENRE

During the early history of the United States, three methods of selection and election were employed in the choice of a President. The first methods

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allowed the members of the electoral college to exercise their independent judgment. The second method provided that a caucus of party members determine the choice of candidates. The third method of selecting candidates was the national nominating convention. The practice of have the temporary chairman of the convention address the delegates after assuming the chair was adopted by the Republicans in 1856. (Although the origin of this practice is open to question, the tradition probably began in the 1832 Democratic convention.) Traditionally, the speech of the temporary chairman of the convention has been labeled as the keynote speech. The first exception to this practice occurred in l952, when the Republican National Committee created two separate positions--a temporary chairman to preside while the permanant organization was being formed, and a keynote speaker who sole responsibility was to give a speech. Governor Thomas H. Kean was the thirty-third Republican keynoter. Unlike most of his historical counterparts whose rhetorical efforts were spotlighted, Governor Kean's speech was generally lost in the shuffle.

In his l960 address to the Republican National Convention in Chicago, Keynoter Walter H. Judd stated:

> . . . I do not believe you want me to indulge in the traditional keynote speech, blaming the other party for everything that is bad, taking credit to ourselves for everything that is good, and promising that if you voters will just elect us to office this fall, we will solve every problem, increase every benefit, expand every existing program, start a whole flock of new ones, give everyone everything he wants--and reduce the national debt at the same time.1

While Dr. Judd intended his remark to be humorous, this statement contains elements of truth. Many of the thirty-three keynote speeches delivered in Republican national conventions have classified the Republican administrations as honest, efficient, dedicated, successful,

forward-thinking and fair-minded. These same keynoters frequently characterized the Democrats as lazy, ineffective, free-spending, insincere, and, at least in the l988 campaign, the dreaded "L" word--liberal. The latter term implying softness on crime and criminals, support of welfare abuse, and ignoring our national defense.

Certainly the role of the keynoter is becoming progressively more clearly defined by the dictates of tradition and precedent. Whereas the earliest keynoters were relatively free to discuss anything from platform issues to pansies, the modern keynoter must deliver a keynote speech that at least approximates that anticipated by the immediate and greater audience. A keynote speech that does not coincide with a "traditional" preconception may be poorly received. Edward Lowry noted that the traditional view of keynoting "implies the ability to make melodic noises and gives the impression of passionately and torrentially moving onward and upward while warily standing still."2 Robert Bendiner's treatment of the keynote ritual is also typical; he stated that the keynote speaker

> is expected to flay the opposition alive and work up to a fine spirit of unity in his own party before it proceeds to tear itself apart over the nomination. Only partisans of the deepest dye can take seriously these grandiloquent outpourings, which credit only one political sect with genius, patriotism, courage, and defense of the American home, while holding the other responsible for wars, crime, early frost and the Colorado beetle. They are viewed solely as virtuoso performances. Every rolling period draws an ovation, and mention of the party's historical giants is likely to bring an outburst.3

CHANGES IN THE REPUBLICAN KEYNOTE GENRE

While the historical role of the keynoter was spotlighted, the role of the contemporary keynoter is confused--or at least obfuscated. Consider, for example, the New Orleans convention. Instead of having the keynoter in the role of attack dog, we saw a whole pack of canines competing for that honor. Were there any speakers who did not orate in the keynoter format? I thought that former President Gerald Ford sounded like the keynoter when in an obvious reference to Senator Ted Kennedy's "where was George" chant, replied that "I'll be damned if I will stand by and let anyone with a smirk and a sneer discredit the honor, service, accountability and competence of George Bush."4 Rejected candidate Pat Robertson praised Bush as a man "I have come to know and to respect." Robertson warned that the Democrats offered "unlimited government, massive transfers of wealth from the productive sector of society to the nonproductive and ever-increasing regulation of the daily lives of the people and their children." Robertson further observed that the Democrats "did not mention once in their platform the G word--the name of God. . . .we are not afraid to pledge allegiance to a flag that is a symbol of a nation under God" . . .5 Still another of the attack dogs, sounding much like the traditional keynoter, stated that Dukakis likes to "boast that he is a card-carrying member of the American Civil Liberties Union, the ACLU. ACLU--that stands for: allowing criminals to leave unsupervised."6 The list could go on--Representative Henry Hyde called the Democrats the "party of abortion on demand. . . and they insist that every taxpayer pay for the abortions."7 New Hampshire Governor John Sununu ridiculed the so called Massachusetts miracle by observing that the "only miracle in Massachusetts is that there is anyone still there who thinks that they have been governed well. . . . Every year, 10,000 to 20,000 Massachusetts "refugees' cross the line to New Hampshire for a better quality of life."8 These quotations are only a few examples from the parade of speaker who all attacked the opposition and lauded the virtues of the Republicans--all doing what the keynoter is supposed to be highlighted for doing.

I recently re-read a piece that I had written in Speech Monographs in 1970. At that time I said that

> the keynote speech is not a purposeless vestige of the convention. The fact is that the rationale

> for selecting a temporary chairman often indicates the strength of various party factions, occasionally introduces a new face which the party is grooming for future leadership, or provides a dark horse candidate with an opportunity to face a national audience.9

I recant. I suspect, at least in 1900, that the keynote speech was indeed a vestigal appendage of the Republican convention.

SPECIFIC SETTING FOR THE SPEECH IN NEW ORLEANS

It would be tempting to suggest that the noisy setting, the disruptions, the inattentive delegates, the intrusive media, etc., were the culprits in the immediate setting for Governor Kean's lacklustre speech. In fact, however, the setting for most national political conventions leaves much to be desired. I suspect that the term "multi-purposive arena" is an oxymoron. But I digress. The 1864 convention in Baltimore was held in the Front Street Theatre where "heat, poor acoustics, and street noise harassed the delegates."10 The 1884 convention met in the huge Industrial Exposition Building in Minneapolis. Not only were the delegates forced to suffer from the heat wave gripping the city, but "resin dripped sporadically from the unseasoned pine roof of the convention hall, forcing delegates either to sit on gummy benches or stand in the aisles and receive direct hits on their bare heads."11 The noise and turmoil bother both speaker and audience. The 1932 keynoter stated that"there is such a state of confusion in the audience at a National Convention that there is not any opportunity for interference from the audience. . . . As a matter of fact, on the platform it is difficult to hear anyone unless they have a loud-speaker connection."12 A delegate to the 1964 convention, held in the San Francisco Cow Palace, said that "there is so much noise and confusion on the floor while the keynote speech is being made that the delegates and alternates actually get to hear very little of it."13

So, what setting faced the Republican keynoter? A building suitable for rock concerts and the New Orleans Saints, a speaking slot among a host of

other quasi-keynoters, including the "great communicator" himself, and an audience in no doubt as the Republican Presidential nominee. To add insult to injury, Vice-President Bush announced his selection of Senator Dan Quayle on the day of Governor Kean's keynote address. No question--the alleged keynoter had been upstaged.

OBSERVATIONS REGARDING GOVERNOR KEAN'S KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Thomas Kean, 53, is Governor of New Jersey, having been first electedin l981. He served for ten years in the state assembly and is a former teacher of history and government. Up until Mr. Bush's announcement of his choice for a running mate on the day of Gov. Kean's keynote address, Kean had been mentioned a possible vice-presidential candidate.

Governor Kean's speech was entitled " America's New Freedoms: The Republican Party After Reagan", and lasted for 36 minutes.

Governor Kean can be an effective platform speaker. His speech on "Teen Pregnancies" delivered before the National Institute for Adolescent Pregnancy on January 14, l988, was a fine piece of work--well written and well delivered. While his keynote speech in New Orleans was competent, it was not notable. I was reminded of a New Yorker cartoon depicting two bums in a ditch sharing a gallon of wine with a caption that read "yes, it's a good wine, but not a great wine".

The weakness in the effectiveness of the speech is not in the speech itself but in the mileau. In fact, upon replaying the videotape I found several notable strengths that I had missed originally. The text reads well. Mr. Kean used the traditional tools of the keynoter, including trotting out the party heroes and "characters". He mentioned Abraham Lincoln, Everett Dirksen, Frederick Douglass, and Teddy Roosevelt, as well as the current governors of Iowa, Indiana and Florida.14 (For some reason, while Governor Hunt of Alabama is listed in the text provided by Governor Kean's office, the name was omitted in the keynote speech as delivered.)

Still another common tactic of the keynoter is to attack the opposition. Kean asked:

> You see this flag of red, white and blue? It symbolizes

> the "Land of the Free" and the "Home of the Brave." Well, their media consultants in Atlanta said they didn't think the colors looked good on television. So they changed the red to pink, blue to azure, and the white to eggshell. Well, I don't know about you, but I believe Americans, Democrat and Republican alike, have no use for pastel patriotism.
>
> But the liberal Democrats are trying to hide more than the colors of our flag--they are trying to hide their true colors.15

A little later in the speech the keynoter said :

> All I can add is a warning. The Dukakis Democrats will try to talk tough but don't be fooled. They may try to talk like Dirty Harry. But they still act like Pee Wee Herman. 16

In addition to parading the party heroes and attacking the opposition, the speaker relied on the use of the audience refrain--a standard technique used by many previous keynoters:

> They call for 'an end to economic violence.' What is really means is taking from those who work and simply giving to those who don't. What does it add up to? <u>More taxes.</u>
>
> And where's Ted Kennedy? Well, he's promoting 'mandated health insurance.' Yet the same idea seems eerily similar to a colossal program for socialized medicine right out of the platform of George McGovern. What does it add up to? <u>More taxes. [audience refrain]</u>
>
> And then there is their nominee. Every day he endorses a new Congressional spending bill 'in 'concept.' Well, to paraphrase Senator Everett

> Dirksen, a little concept here and a little concept there, and pretty soon you are talking about real money. What does it add up to? More taxes. [audience refrain]
>
> Look beneath the rhetoric. Add up all the way-out programs of the Democratic party. What does the name of Dukakis sound like to you? More taxes/ [audience refrain and sustained applause]17

The same refrain device was used later in the speech when the the Governor said:

> Just think for a moment. How many West Germans climb the Berlin Wall to East Germany? Not one. [audience refrain] How many Malaysians pack up and plan to move to North Vietnam? Not one. [audience refrain] And I ask you, how many Costa Ricans tomorrow morning will stand in line for visas for Nicaragua? Not one. [audience refrain] They would have to be out of their minds.18

Shifting from traditional techniques of the keynoting genre to other rhetorical matters, the l988 Republican keynoter was fond of alliteration. Kean noted that the Reagan-Bush years showed that the heroes of the American economy "are not paper pushers along the Potomac, but the dream makers in Dayton, Denver and Dallas."19 "While living in a dangerous world", Kean noted, "we need the ship of state in seasoned, strong and steady hands."20 At other points in the speech, Kean spoke of "color or culture or creed"21, and deplored our beaches "sullied by sewage and syringes..."22

Structurally, the speech holds together fairly well, beginning with Columbus' ship and concluding that in ". . .this voyage of America....all of us of this ship of freedom. . .it is our generation's watch on deck. . ."23 The Governor makes effective use of transitions and other partititioning

devices.

Among the 33 Republican keynote speeches I'd put Governor Kean's speech in the top 25% for its intrinsic merits. In context, and for no fault of his own, the speech was upstaged in advance by President Reagan, diluted by other quasi-keynoters, moved off the headlines by the selection of Dan Quayle, and finished off by a week of media hype proclaiming that Vice President Bush must make the greatest speech of his life when accepting the nomination the next evening. I suspect that Governor Kean was in a loss/loss situation. Perhaps Kean was prophetic when in a USA Today interview he was asked the following question: "Keynote speeches often propel people to greater heights in their political careers. Do you expect that to happen to you?

Governor Kean's response was light-hearted:

> They propel them both ways. (laughs) Everybody always thinks about New York Gov. Mario Cuomo. I've done some talking to him because we're friends, but you'd have to go all the way back, maybe to Alben Barkley, to find another keynoter who was better off after he'd finished his speech. I can think of a lot of keynoters who were worse off after they'd finished their speech. You build up certain hopes and expectations on a keynoter. You know, people say, 'He may be a great fellow, but that wasn't a great speech.'24

FOOTNOTES

1 Walter H. Judd, text provided by the Republican National Committee.

2 Edward G. Lowry, Washington Close-Ups (Boston, 1921), p. 12.

3 Robert Bendiner, White House Fever (New York, 1960), p. 71.

4 Washington Times, Wednesday, August 17, 1988, p. A-1,ff.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Paul A. Barefield, "Republican Keynoters", Speech Monographs, XXXVII, Number 4, November, 1970, p 232.

10 George H. Mayer, The Republican Party: 1854-1964 (New York, 1964), p. 118.

11 Ibid., pp. 233-234.

12 Personal correspondence of the writer, letter from L. J. Dickinson, May 17, 1965.

13 Personal correspondence of the writer, letter from John N. Dalton, April 5, 1965.

14 Text of Governor Kean's speech provided by the Governor's Office.

15 Ibid., p. 1.

16 Ibid., p. 3. I must admit that I was unfamiliar with Pee Wee Herman at the time I heard Gov. Kean's speech. I asked a colleague at the university if this person was the former shortstop for the Brooklyn Dodgers. One of my children enlightened me at a later time.

17 Ibid., p. 3.

18 Ibid., p. 4.

19 Ibid., p. 3.

20 Ibid., p. 3.

21 Ibid., p. 7.

22 Ibid., p. 7.

23 Ibid., p. 8.

24 USA TODAY, Monday, August 15, 1988, p. 11A.